

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

From Research to Practice, a column dedicated to recognizing successful "bridges" between researchers and practitioners, reports on research with practical implications for youth civic engagement. Additionally, it presents concrete examples of how practitioners have applied this research to encourage the participation of young people in civic and political life.

MEANINGFUL LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CONFINES OF THE SCHOOL BUILDING

In his recent book, ***Why Community Matters: Connecting Education with Civic Life***, Nicholas Longo advocates a broader definition of "civic education." He argues that "schools are essential for the civic growth of children, but inadequate to the educational equation. Communities must also be educative." He cites examples from U.S. history, compiles lessons learned from his research, and highlights current work that illustrates how these lessons can be put into practice, two of which are highlighted in this article.

Longo describes his book as "an attempt to introduce a conception of learning and civic life in which education for democracy is a function of whole communities." He provides the following recommendations for connecting education with civic life:

- Commit to making change over extended periods of time,
- Place a deliberate emphasis on comprehensive and public education which utilize community relationships,
- Make learning relevant to people's everyday lives,
- Recognize the creative powers of diversity through community work,
- Utilize the talents and instincts of nonprofessionals,
- Foster reciprocal relationships, and
- Embrace flexibility and trust in the messiness of democracy.

Both the Neighborhood Learning Community (NLC) in St. Paul, Minnesota and the University of Pennsylvania Center for Community Partnerships (CCP) provide insights into how some of these lessons manifest and can be used in everyday practice.

USING A MISSION STATEMENT TO CULTIVATE A "LONG-TERM" COMMITMENT

Longo states that "having educators willing to 'stick to it' is essential for long-term civic change." One way organizations can stay focused on the long-term change is by developing a mission statement focused on a place and the "big picture." As seen in the text box, both NLC and CCP have created mission statements that clearly articulate a long-term commitment to a place as a defining aspect of their work. Nan Skelton, Co-Director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota, one of the coordinating partners of the NLC, suggests that higher education institutions that seek to create a culture of learning, such as the NLC, should first "focus on a place" and then get to know

that place. "From there," she says, "think about how one could connect their institution to that whole place so students have a way to be there over time."

CIVIC MISSION STATEMENTS

The Center for Community Partnerships (CCP) is the University of Pennsylvania's "primary vehicle for bringing to bear the broad range of human knowledge needed to solve the complex, comprehensive, and interconnected problems of the American city so that West Philadelphia (Penn's local geographic community), Philadelphia, the University itself, and society benefit. Through the Center, the University currently engages in three types of activities: academically based community service, direct traditional service, and community development."¹

The Neighborhood Learning Community (NLC), "is a network of people and organizations working together to strengthen learning on the West Side of St. Paul, Minnesota. We create a culture of learning by tapping the experience and aspirations of all people through leadership development, language learning, informal learning experiences and sharing resources."²

¹ <http://www.upenn.edu/ccp/about/about-the-center.html>

² <http://www.westsidlearning.org/index.html>

EMPHASIZING RELATIONAL EDUCATION

One of the keys to the NLC's surviving over time, Skelton suggests, is that "people are gathering together on a very regular basis with time for work they're going to do together and reflection on the meaning of that work. So it's not all tasks. It's not all tactics." Another way they promote relational education is through the regular activities of a "coordinating group" who, Skelton notes, all "have a stake in the vision." The coordinating group has met diligently every month, "ensuring that they have reflective time together" as well.

According to Skelton, "When people come together for the first time or there are new people in the group we do a story circle so that each individual tells their story in relation to a theme or what we're working on." Skelton believes that "in sharing people really

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develop a respect for one another.”

FOSTERING RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS

Skelton and Harkavy emphasize that their respective universities have resources that they can leverage to which their partners would not otherwise have access. Skelton specifically points to their ability to leverage professional development resources and youth development training through the University of Minnesota for the benefit of the neighborhood and the work they are doing.


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Ira Harkavy, Founding Director of the CCP, attributes the CCP's ability to do long-term work to having "strong partners who we learn from" and "an enthusiastic group of students and faculty who believe in the work and are committed to advancing it." On September 7th, 2007 a ribbon-cutting ceremony marked the opening of the Sayre Health Center (SHC), an idea that emerged from an undergraduate research project. Today the SHC is a nonprofit that will "provide clinical services to residents of the surrounding community, and educational opportunities for high school, undergraduate, and graduate students."¹ The SHC, housed in Sayre High School, "is a cooperative effort between the University of Pennsylvania, the Sayre High School, and the West Philadelphia community surrounding the school."²

TRUSTING THE MESSINESS OF DEMOCRACY

In the preface of his book, Longo talks about connecting civic learning to a "broader culture of engagement." He suggests that civic educators can transform the traditional paradigm wherein "civic education becomes about getting young people to participate in the system as it is, rather than helping to create a different kind of public life." He believes embracing flexibility

and trusting in the "messiness of democracy" are essential for connecting civic education and civic life.

Both Nan Skelton and Ira Harkavy frame their work in the context of ideas and the democratic process. Dr. Harkavy attributes the successes at CCP to the "powerful democratic partnerships." Dr. Skelton talks about the work of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship as having a "grounded theory" that is the foundation: "Our work is focusing on civic learning and democratic practice and so we really use our leadership to help guide democratic practice in a neighborhood." 

HELPFUL LINKS

The Center for Community Partnerships

<http://www.upenn.edu/ccp/index.php>

Sayre Health Center

<http://sayrehealth.org/index.html>

Neighborhood Learning Community

<http://www.westsidlearning.org/index.html>

Center for Democracy and Citizenship

<http://www.publicwork.org/home.html>

¹ <http://sayrehealth.org/>

² *ibid*